“Drama in Coalfields and Paddyfields…”

Ava Hunt

As a practitioner of drama in education for over 20 years where the majority of my experience has been with groups of young people in areas of social deprivation, but most recently in the ex-coalfields of Derbyshire, much of my work has been informed by practitioners such as Boal, Heathcote & Bolton, Way and Spolin exploring empowerment and oppression. So when I was recently offered the opportunity to develop my practice internationally with young people in Sri Lanka alongside a colleague of mine Sue Allen, an English Teacher who works at Tibshelf Secondary School, Derbyshire – I jumped at the chance!

As a developing country, Sri Lanka has been a victim of disaster not only of nature but also mankind - after a truce with the LLTE (Tamil Tigers) in 2002, Sri Lanka was enjoying a healthy period of peace and rising tourism, when the Tsunami on Boxing Day 2004 ensued - over 35,000 people were killed and 500,000 were displaced, even four years on young people continue to grow up in crowded orphanages – parents do not reappear, and now on top of this the truce has collapsed between the Sri Lankan government and the LLTE and civil war has broken out again. Not surprisingly tourism has trailed off and with the LLTE now targeting public buses (24 people were killed on 25th April 2008 on a commuter bus on the outskirts of Colombo) – road blocks, bag searches, and soldiers parading semi automatic guns and rifles on streets and beaches will remain commonplace.

The purpose of my visit was to be able to contribute to various groups that were set up after the Tsunami – one charity in particular, Adopt Sri Lanka, – it’s purpose to create links and offer cultural exchanges between young people in the UK and Sri Lanka. It would be true to say that some school twins have not survived after the initial flurry following the Tsunami but the legacy of the displaced continues. Most schools offer a bare minimum in relation to resources and teaching styles are mainly ‘chalk & talk’ so introducing drama would be an exciting opportunity for me to provide teachers with an easily resourced alternative teaching style that would engage young people actively and emotionally.

Drama is a methodology that cuts across reticence and social barriers – much of the work that I have delivered in the Derbyshire coalfields starts with suspicion from the group initially but which is quickly transformed into fully expressed young people, who rejoice at the opportunity of shouting and acting out their aggression or challenging the authority figures in their lives. Knowing how to engage and work with this energy is a skilful job and one which the feeling of in trepidation never disappears. So, whatever my fears, of exchanging the coalfields of Derbyshire for the paddyfields of Sri Lanka, I would need to understand how to work with young people for whom the trauma of the Tsunami would still be present, together with cultural differences, and language barriers. Simple!

I would be working in a secondary school - Ihalgoda, a school in a poor rural area near Galle (famous for its Test Cricket ground), and where Sinhalese is spoken but English is the aspirant language. The workshop objective would be to develop the pupils’ confidence in speaking English to their pen pals from Tibshelf School who would be visiting in July. I work, initially, using still images (providing a non-verbal snap shot that is always revealing).
As any practitioner in the UK will know, ask any group of young people from 6-16 years old to create images of authority figures - parents, teachers, police and the image rarely changes from a pointing finger, or a fist and a shouting mouth. But in Ihalgoda the group produce images that are starkly different. All are respectful and caring – not a single image suggests imposed or oppressive behaviour. Is the depiction selected to please me, or to honour their on-looking teachers? Or was this the truth for these young Sri Lankan pupils? Was everyone so caring and calm that no-one in the heat of the moment expressed their true emotion? I knew from discussions and my reading that “Sri Lankans place great emphasis on politeness and manners…..raising your voice makes you look foolish and ill bred” (Thomas, 2006). Exercises that were dependent on playing with language were less successful and on reflection this was where I would need to set my limits. Finally, at the end of this first workshop I introduced some in-role work. The group would create a character - what they liked, what they were afraid of etc (what she was angry about didn’t resonate with the pupils at all of course) and I then with a piece of costume, I performed the character. They enjoyed seeing me in role and although they were shy at first (again not wanting to offend me or do anything that might be ‘wrong’) gradually the improvisation developed appropriately and sensitively. I then handed this corporate character over to them to continue to develop in pairs, which then enveloped into each pair performing a short scene back to the rest of the group. The scene involved a Viola Spolin exercise - using a mimed object, in this case - a present - which is then interpreted by the recipient as something that they’ve always wanted to receive. I was delighted at the results, the verbal communication was simple but the visual, and the emotional playing of the characters was expressive, playful and joyful to watch. The group, had by the end of the session, embraced the spirit of play, developed the confidence to perform and interact through the use of character! It had gone well but I was left feeling uneasy as to how to interpret those still images, and I was to discover later that these images were far from the truth.

After further research and planning I was ready to deliver the training for Adopt Sri Lanka not only working with a group of 12 year olds orphaned by the Tsunami, but watched by 50 Sri Lankan teachers wishing to develop their teaching skills, but also filmed for a DVD as a teaching resource – not too much pressure then. In 35°C and 95% humidity plus lights for the cameras, an audience watching my every move, 12 nervous young people and a translator – how badly could things go? I set out my learning outcomes emphasising the benefits of drama as a learning methodology (in addition to developing speaking and listening skills) on the premises that if “90% of learning is unconscious” (Norman, 1999) then there were additional powerful learning opportunities; i.e. team building, communication skills such as eye contact and body language, presentation skills, creativity, emotional intelligence etc.

Despite the sweat rolling down my legs (not an attractive look!), the workshop went well, the group was made up of eight girls and four boys, the boys looked younger than their 12 years, and forgetting that they were orphans was not possible – the decisions that they made for our corporate character were shaped by their expectations and pain - our character would: enjoy birthdays, but be afraid of ghosts. In their performances I was delighted to see their creativity emerge – (the picture shows two boys opening their mimed birthday presents to spontaneously reveal - in the foreground a guitar and in the background a piano).
The demonstration workshop was then followed by small group workshops with teachers digging deeper into the practice of using drama. I opened the session with a quick game of Fruit Salad and this is where the ‘politeness and manners’ disappear – here again was another example of contradiction, on any public bus or train that I had travelled on in Sri Lanka the mad dash for a seat was unrivalled by anything that I had ever experienced, and the game revealed the true cultural sensibilities – never have I seen a game of Fruit Salad attacked with such fervour! Those teachers pushing each other out of the way, as they dashed across the circle for a seat will stay with me forever!

I finished my research in Sri Lanka with meeting theatre practitioners, community artists, workshop leaders, charities and visual artists discussing their work, their political beliefs, their frustrations and of course, passions. As discussions with artists unfolded a different picture emerges - domestic violence, huge pressures to achieve academically, alcoholism are all too common and Sri Lanka has the highest suicide rates in the world for the under 25’s*. The young people in Derbyshire were able to offer an image of the truth without fear of recrimination, a free undiluted expression, and although teachers, Mid-day supervisors and parents can be heard lamenting the days of children being quiet and polite; surely, in the end, this must be a healthier option than a suppressed existence offering a distortion of reality? The artists that I spoke to were happy to discuss these contradictions openly and discuss how drama can play a vital role but in a country that has no central government funding for the arts, it is an uphill struggle. I also realised during these discussions that as artists we felt and believed the same – that only through art can our true humanity be expressed, and through that expression can we heal ourselves and create a better world. Or as colleagues of mine in Sri Lanka express it:

“Where there is art, there is hope”
Sunera Foundation, Sri Lanka

Word count: 1,579

References

(*) “Sri Lanka has the world’s highest suicide rate, over 55 per 100,000 people— average ranges between 10 and 25 per 100,000” 2001. (http://www.wsws.org/articles/2001/dec2001/sri-d28.shtml)

If anyone wishing to know more about the charities mentioned please go to:
www.adoptsrilanka.com
www.sunerafoundation.org

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